

Monday, January 31, 2022

MINUTES OF THE EDUCATIONAL DIVERSITY, EQUITY & INCLUSION COMMITTEE OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held January 31, 2022, at Central High School, 1 Lincoln Boulevard, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:34 p.m. Present were members Chair Joseph Sokolovic, Bobbi Brown, and Erika Castillo. Board member Sybil Allen was present. Board member Albert Benejan joined the meeting subsequently as noted.

Supt. Michael J. Testani was present.

Ms. Brown moved to approve the minutes of the meeting of May 28, 2021. The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic and unanimously approved.

Mr. Benejan joined the meeting.

The next agenda item was on committee goals and objectives. Mr. Sokolovic suggested the committee will use data-driven information to apply an equity lens to the entire Bridgeport Public School system to identify any and all policies, procedures, services, and/or programs that are disparitly impacting any distinct group of students and/or staff. The committee will seek to rectify any issues found through committee discussions, research, and will also make referrals to other committees, create focus groups, and/or make referrals to the full board for further action. It will also seek to promote initiatives and activities that promote unity among Bridgeport Public Schools' diverse student body, staff, and the greater Bridgeport public school communities.

Ms. Brown said she agreed with that.

The next agenda item was a review of staff/student demographic data from November 20, 2020.

Supt. Testani said he was filling in for Dr. McPherson. He said he obtained data from the state Department of Education in response to a request from Dr. Fabian.

The superintendent said the state provided data on those who hold an active teaching certificate in Connecticut. There were 6,265 people that didn't identify with any race or 7.7 percent; Native American was 139 persons (.16 percent); 1,105 Asian (1.26 percent); 3,358 African American (3.83 percent); 72,537 white (82.65 percent); 3,852 Hispanic (4.39 percent). Eight persons identify as more than one race. The total percentage of minorities is 9.64.

The superintendent said Bridgeport had one of the highest percentages of staff: 12 percent is black or African American and 11 percent is Hispanic or Latino of any race. He said this lags behind the student body, especially in the area of Hispanic/Latino, which is 54 percent of the student population.

Supt. Testani said every district in the state has the same goal, to increase the diversity of their staffing, which puts Bridgeport in competition with districts that can offer more in pay and benefits. He said an important strategy is to tap into our own student body to enter into the teaching field through incentives.

Mr. Sokolovic noted the disparities in the percentages of staff to students. He said it was all well and good to do well

in the state, but he said we should be a better Bridgeport than we were yesterday.

Supt. Testani said the Today's Student, Tomorrow's Teachers program had existed for several years in the district but became costly and was discontinued. The district is now working with them again, but they will be looking for the district to contribute money. He said there is also a teacher residency program with Sacred Heart University which attempts to direct district students to become teachers here.

Ms. Brown said she wondered if these were the types of careers young people wanted. She said a lot of non-traditional careers are now popular and they also pay more.

Supt. Testani said from talking to students he finds that they do not feel enticed to the teaching profession because of the way teachers are treated by some of their peers. He noted the cost of higher education was a huge investment compared to earning potential. He said he has read articles pointing to a coming crisis in teaching coming out of the pandemic.

Ms. Brown said she believed young teachers would not stand for behavioral issues as readily as veteran teachers. The superintendent said 40 percent of the district's teaching staff is in its first six years. He said the wage is often not competitive to keep the younger teachers in the district. He described teachers who work in bars and restaurant for financial reasons.

Mr. Sokolovic said the median income of a Bridgeport resident is under a teacher's salary, which can top out at close to \$100,000 a year, plus benefits.

The superintendent said he has tried to sell the pension component to teaching, but young people are not looking 35 years down the road about their pension. He said he has advocate for giving teachers in Alliance districts an early retirement option as a draw.

Ms. Castillo said from her personal experience as a Bridgeport public school student she learned that money talks. She wondered why Bridgeport as the largest city did not have the most amount of money to work with. She said salaries had to be a priority. She said as a Latina the numbers on staff were abysmal.

Mr. Sokolovic said since the 74 percent of Caucasian teachers find salaries acceptable enough, salaries are not the main impediment to the balance. The superintendent said it's reflective of the people in the state with certifications.

Mr. Benejan said we need to support our staff.

Mr. Sokolovic said there was a far less disparity in African American administrators due to an intentional recruitment effort.

Supt. Testani said we had to work with higher education on teacher preparation programs. He said a lot of schools in the South did not have teacher preparation programs. He said the district has tried to recruit in Puerto Rico and there have been discussions with the Hartford superintendent about this.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said the teacher residency program is designed to recruit paraprofessionals

to become teachers. He said a barrier is they must leave their job to go to school. He said federal dollars are being looked at for use in this area.

In response to a question, the superintendent said teachers have been given coaching assistance if they find the Praxis process difficult. He said a teacher on special assignment in HR is involved in recruiting and works with new teachers. Another teacher on special assignment will be deployed to assist him. He said in the past a lot of the assistance for new teachers was front-loaded in the first year, but in the last few years his goal has been to balance it out through the first three or four years.

Ms. Allen described her efforts in the district and noted a lot of her students went on to become teachers. She said her grandmother was a teacher in South Carolina who taught her techniques to use. Ms. Allen said she was sent from here to attend high school in South Carolina.

The superintendent said it is different to teach today due to the diversity, including the diversity in the needs of children. He said the state certification process for teachers needs to be revised in the light of special education and ELL, and the current state of education.

Ms. Allen said teachers need to have innovative skills.

Ms. Castillo said teaching programs at universities are challenging to get into, including at the University of Bridgeport. The superintendent said internships with the universities have been brought back. He said cuts to the intern programs cut off a pipeline with universities that he and others in the district used as a student as well.

In response to a question, the superintendent described the residency program. Mr. Sokolovic suggested surveying paras to see how many have four-year degrees as opposed to two-year degrees. Supt. Testani said HR has been working on demographic data on the district's paraprofessionals.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said a five-percent goal to decrease disparity would be huge. He said the district was up to almost 4700 ELL students in the district. He described a program to certify teachers in this area.

In response to a question, the superintendent said the Praxis exam can be a stumbling block to certification. He said salary schedules should reflect the areas of teacher shortages. He said there were now difficulties filling elementary vacancies, which has never been the case before.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said Bridgeport residents and graduates of Bridgeport schools are taken into consideration by HR in hiring.

Ms. Brown said although she loved Bridgeport, we have to be honest and admit the culture in the city is a barrier to recruiting people.

Supt. Testani said there has been an influx of families moving from New York to Bridgeport that he has spoken to about perceptions of Bridgeport.

Mr. Sokolovic urged looking at the applicants that have been passed over building by building because there may be subconscious bias at work. The superintendent said he could ask if that data was available. He said in the last few

years there were enough vacancies to hire many applicants unless they did not show any ability to teach.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said there were 72 vacancies at last count. He said recommendations to hire come from the principals at the building level.

Mr. Benejan said a lot of people do not understand what we are going through in Bridgeport.

In response to a question, the superintendent said it is not hard for certified New York teachers to obtain certification in Connecticut. He said it is difficult to get speech language pathologists because there are only two programs in the entire state with a limited cohort. He noted the teacher retirements in the state each year do not match up with the number of graduates in the needed areas.

Mr. Sokolovic said it was like a gigantic jigsaw puzzle that we had to work on one piece at a time.

The next agenda item was an equity review of enrollment in AP courses.

The superintendent said the majority of AP enrollment is at Central High because of the magnet program.

The superintendent described the feeder program into Central Magnet, including the blind lottery.

Mr. Sokolovic requested the data be sent as a bar graph. He said going forward he would like data presented in bar graphs.

The superintendent said as a former counselor it is a challenge sometimes to get seniors to commit to AP courses. There are also scheduling difficulties in fitting the courses in the students' days.

Mr. Sokolovic noted disparities in AP courses between males and females. He said there were gender-conforming roles in a lot of heads and stereotypes had to be eliminated. He noted that usually females outnumber males in the enrollment in high schools.

Mr. Sokolovic said we had to be intentional in our language and in our actions because there was a lot of work to do.

The next agenda item was on possible future agenda items.

Ms. Castillo said she would like to see an overview of hiring practices. The superintendent said the board policy is listed on the website. He added summer hiring is very competitive even against colleagues in the district.

Ms. Brown said she would like to see discussions of how our curriculum reflects our students, not just in high school, but across the board. The superintendent said this is a main focus when the Bridgeport does curriculum renewal.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Teaching & Learning Committee had looked at the curriculum through an equity lens.

The superintendent said the social studies curriculum renewal process for elementary schools will begin shortly.

Ms. Brown said the training with Dr. Gay was amazing. Supt. Testani said Dr. Gay has come back to the district four times for training. The next one will be for clerical staff. He said

there is more work contracted with him and there is one that can be used for students. Ms. Brown said she believed it would be very beneficial for students. She said a lot of students are watching a show called *All-American* that show students taking back the power as to how they want to see their schools run. She said students may be able to contribute thoughts in the area of DEI as to what is needed.

Supt. Testani said when he saw Dr. Gay he was so impressive he knew we had to bring him here.

Mr. Sokolovic said he would like to bring anti-racist training to the board. He described it as more proactive and hard-hitting.

Mr. Sokolovic said a lot of things we're trying to change here may not be accomplished until the future, after our tenure on the board is concluded.

Ms. Brown moved to adjourn the meeting. The motion was seconded by Ms. Castillo and unanimously approved.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:07 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod